

Connecting knowledge to power: the future of digital democracy in the UK

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*Since its invention, the internet has been considered a 'game-changer' when it comes to democracy, with a worldwide network providing the potential to create a truly participatory democracy. This has yet to happen, but numerous individuals and groups are beginning to ask what can be done to marry the internet with representative democracy, including the Speaker of the House of Commons. Here, **Chris Waller** and **Louis Reynolds** discuss an exciting new project which seeks to use a [wiki approach to crowdsource](#) a submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy.*



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We are living through a crisis of modern politics. Across Europe, citizens are becoming increasingly alienated from the politicians and political institutions that seek to represent them. Levels of trust in politicians have sunk to record lows. In the United Kingdom, the number of people who trust the government, at least most of the time, has dropped to a [miserable 24 per cent](#). At the same time, membership of political parties has fallen radically. In 1980 more than four per cent of the population [belonged](#) to a political party; today [around one per cent do](#). Declining voter turnout, party membership and trust in political institutions is by no means a British problem. Across Europe and the developed world, these persistent trends have exposed the growing gulf between the political system and the people.

With the gap between government and the people growing rapidly, efforts to engage citizens in the political process are more urgent than ever.

In the mid-nineties, when the internet first started to gain popular traction, there was substantial optimism about the possibility of it providing a potential solution to these problems, which even then were becoming apparent. [Some claimed](#) that the internet would 'spread participatory democracy', and forge 'a new era of Athenian democracy.' This optimism, which until recently coloured our understanding of social media, has begun to fade. While political debate

flourishes on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, attempts to meaningfully link this activity to the established political process have failed.

From futile online petitions to the sanitised tweets of politicians, efforts to bring the political establishment and citizens together online have been, for the most part, inconsequential. Attempts to do so have, on the whole, roughly divided into PR efforts or token mechanisms to measure public opinion. Politics is marketed to the people, but they are not involved in it. The role of the digital citizens, for the time being, remains that of an outsider, and that is exactly how citizens as a whole feel.

This is not to say that there isn't potential for digital voices to be heard outside of the internet. Wikipedia's ongoing project to compile the sum of human knowledge and make it freely and universally accessible is an excellent example of how online participation can have truly tangible results.

As it stands, Wikipedia is one of the most trusted and widely used resources in the world. The continuing success of this project is driven in no small part by the quiet determination of Wikipedians. Beyond the enormous volume of encyclopaedic content produced by the community, Wikipedia constitutes a diverse arrangement of projects, discussion groups, committees, and more. Far from the arcane, dusty image that some people have of the community, Wikipedians are increasingly engaging in outreach projects outside of the net.

The Wikiversity project, for instance, which aims to collaboratively provide teaching material for schools and universities around the world, has recently found its way into the Israeli national curriculum. Students are being taught to source information and edit articles as a means of both learning from and contributing to the project. In addition to compiling the learning material, valuable skills about research and collaboration are being taught to students. For Wikipedia the hope is that projects of this nature will not only help teachers and students, but will also ensure the future of the community by demonstrating the value of collaboration at an early age.

Beyond the vast amount of work that goes into making Wikipedia a successful and trustworthy resource is a community who are able to think big ideas and put them into practice. Some have put this down to luck (Wikipedia was able to reach a critical mass of contributors at a relatively early point in the internet's development). Others see the success of Wikipedia as proof of the inherent goodness of the internet; indeed, there is no shortage of idealists arguing that every state institution could be reinvented as a [Wikipedia-style organisation](#). What is clear is that there is much we can learn from Wikipedia's example.

With the recent call for evidence put out by the Speaker John Bercow as part of the Commission on Digital Democracy, we at Demos feel that there is an opportunity here for two great forums to meet. Demos and Wikimedia UK have launched a joint effort to crowd source opinions on the future of digital democracy. We hope to see whether the Wikipedia community can usefully engage with the government in their own way by collaboratively producing a submission to be considered by the Commission. Engaging citizens online represents a fantastic opportunity to reinvigorate our political system, but to do so meaningfully a new approach is required.

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[If you wish to be a part of this project, click here to visit its homepage](#)

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